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Pattern of conferences

Improving the performance of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services

Status of recruitment for the Interpretation Section at the United Nations Office at Nairobi

Simultaneous availability of parliamentary documentation in the six official languages on the United Nations web site

Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the reports of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/57/228), improving the performance of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services (A/57/289) and the status of recruitment for the Interpretation Section at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (A/56/901), as well as the note by the Secretary-General on the simultaneous availability of parliamentary documentation in the six official languages on the United Nations web site (A/C.5/56/37). During its consideration of the reports, the Advisory Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarification.

2. The Advisory Committee takes note of the information provided in the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences concerning utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities, including consideration of changes in the methodology used for calculating the utilization factor (A/57/228, paras. 4-22). The Committee notes in particular the mention in paragraph 22 of "contingencies" or "ad hoc adjustments" that could be resorted to in order to avoid early endings of meetings. The Committee points out that suggestions such as the inclusion of additional agenda items for a particular meeting in case the list of speakers is exhausted sooner than anticipated or rescheduling or combining meetings for which not enough speakers are inscribed would not be possible for bodies that do not operate using a formal agenda or a list of speakers. **In the opinion of the Committee, the statistics for utilization, the conclusions arrived at using those statistics and the action taken in response should take into account the specific situations that govern the work of some of the bodies in the underutilization category.**

3. The Advisory Committee notes that the report of the Secretary-General on improving the performance of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and

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Conference Services (A/57/289) makes no mention of two earlier evaluations of the operations of the Department, namely, the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the inspection of the consolidation of technical support services in the Department (A/55/803) and the comprehensive study of the Secretary-General on conference services (A/C.5/49/34 and Corr.1). **Many of the conclusions reached in those evaluations remain valid and should be taken into account when considering the most recent report.**

4. Upon request, the Advisory Committee was provided with a revised version of the organization chart contained in the report, which includes the posts associated with the various restructured units of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (see annex I below).

5. The Advisory Committee notes the plan to integrate within the Department the technical servicing secretariats of the Fifth and Sixth Committees of the General Assembly (see A/57/289, paras. 10-11). The Committee was informed that the budgetary implications of the change would be reported in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005.

6. The Advisory Committee notes the statement that requests for sessions beyond authorized duration, or intersessional "informal consultations" that take the form of additional unapproved sessions under another name, will be channelled for consideration through the Committee on Conferences (ibid., para. 15). **The Committee cautions against imposing too strict a rule in such cases. A pragmatic approach should be followed in order not to introduce unnecessary restrictions on the ability of an intergovernmental body or conference to reach a successful conclusion. In this connection, the Committee recalls its comments in paragraph I.50 of its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003.**[1]

7. The Advisory Committee notes the section of the report entitled "integrating global management" (ibid., paras. 31-40), in particular paragraph 39 thereof, in which the role of the Department and the Under-Secretary-General in the areas of budgeting and personnel at all the duty stations is discussed. **While the Committee commends the aim of ensuring that the institutional relationship between the Department and the other three duty stations is uniform and effectively supports the goal of integrated global management of the Department (ibid., para. 33), it cautions against a situation in which the Department might become a remote supervisor. The Committee stresses that the concept of delegation of authority should not be compromised. The objective should be for the Department to centralize general policy setting and formulation of standards and guidelines while delegating full responsibility and accountability for day-to-day operational activities, including management of budgetary and staff resources.**

8. The Advisory Committee notes that the examination of the Department described in the report focused mainly on Headquarters. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that the overseas duty stations had been consulted and that a draft of the report had been given to them for comment but that reform of those offices would be included in a second phase. **The Committee emphasizes that involvement of the overseas duty stations and the related legislative machinery is essential if reform is to be successful. The Committee recalls paragraph I.27 of its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003, in which it emphasized the need for closer cooperation among all duty stations and the regional commissions in the use of conference-servicing resources.**

9. In this connection, the Advisory Committee was informed of the intention of the Secretariat to initiate a system-wide review of meeting schedules. The Committee welcomes this initiative and sees merit in the involvement of Member States in the exercise, with a view to optimizing the use of conference-servicing resources across all duty stations and the regional commissions.

10. In the report, the Secretary-General discusses a number of translation and interpretation issues (ibid., paras. 34-36). The Advisory Committee takes note of the statement in paragraph 36 that existing pay scales for contractual translation have not changed since 1995, putting the Organization in a position where it is less competitive with other bidders for translation services, as well as of the Secretary-General's intention to develop proposals to introduce a new rate scale so that the corps of contractual translators can be expanded. The Committee welcomes the Department's intention to explore the possibilities afforded by

electronic transmission of documentation to increase the use of off-site translators for the more time-sensitive documents, which heretofore have been handled by on-site translators only (freelance contractors based in their home countries have traditionally been employed only for documents with a long lead time). The new system is intended to reduce the need for freelance translators on site, thereby producing substantial savings in respect of travel and per diem. The Committee understands that practical arrangements, such as pay rates for such translators, are still to be worked out. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that, owing to the shortage of in-house translation resources, only random spot checks were conducted on the work of contractual translators. **The Committee is of the view that the implementation of the new system should be carefully monitored and that the expanded use of contractual and off-site translators should include provision for revision by in-house revisers.**

11. The Advisory Committee has noted a significant deterioration in the quality of translations in some languages. Upon request, the Committee was provided with an outline of factors affecting the quality of translations (see annex II). Among these was the fact that, owing to a high number of retirements and resignations in the Translation and Editorial Division as a whole, there is an imbalance between experienced staff and junior staff in some of the translation services. In addition, as mentioned in paragraph 10 above, some of the translation services have had problems attracting and retaining qualified staff owing to competition from other employers, such as the European Union, and this has, in some cases, led to high vacancy rates.

12. The Advisory Committee urges the Department to seek innovative solutions to the problem of the deteriorating quality of translation. **In particular, the Committee recommends a renewed commitment to training for both translators and interpreters.** In this connection, the Committee welcomes the re-establishment of the in-house interpreter training programme, as recommended by the Committee in its report of 16 October 2001 (A/56/475) and approved by the General Assembly in section IV, paragraph 3, of its resolution 56/242 of 24 December 2001. The Committee understands that ad hoc arrangements exist in the translation services to provide on-the-job training to promising candidates identified through informal in-service translation examinations. Such candidates are recruited as freelance translators for short periods, during which they undergo on-the-job training under close supervision with the aim of increasing their chances of success on United Nations competitive examinations for translators. **The Committee recommends that the Department look into the possibility of using national translation and interpretation institutions for training. The Committee requests that training programmes be clearly identified in future programme budget proposals.**

13. The Advisory Committee notes the information concerning current workload standards for interpreters, translators and text processors (ibid., annex I). The Committee also notes that the Committee on Conferences, in paragraphs 84 and 85 of its report to the General Assembly at its fifty-seventh session[2] has requested the Secretary-General to update the standards, taking into account the best practices and experience of other bodies and organizations and drawing on expert advice as needed. In view of the fact that the current standards measure quantitative output only, the Committee on Conferences also invited the Secretary-General to develop further performance indicators in order to evaluate the quality of the functions performed.

14. The Advisory Committee was informed of the intention of the Secretary-General to abolish the Official Records Editing Section. As indicated in the report (A/57/289, annex II, para. 4; see also annex I below), a new Editorial, Terminology and Reference Service will be established through the integration of the Editorial Control Section and the Terminology and Reference Section. The plan includes strengthening the editing function through the redeployment of some editors from the Official Records Editing Section to the new Service. The concordance of the different language versions of draft resolutions, formerly performed after their adoption by editors in the Official Records Editing Section, would in future be performed prior to adoption by editors/translators redeployed from the former Official Records Editing Section to the translation services. **The Committee stresses the importance of retaining the concordance principle in order to ensure equally valid texts of resolutions in all six official languages.**

15. With respect to departmental plans for optimizing the use of technology (ibid., paras. 41-48), the

Advisory Committee notes with interest the plan of action described in paragraphs 42 and 43 for complete electronic processing of documents. The Committee was informed that the project mentioned in paragraph 44 to include online interactive capabilities in the new *Journal of the United Nations* had already been implemented. The Committee welcomes this development. As indicated in paragraph 47, a number of projects are under consideration for implementation in the context of the capital master plan. **The Committee requests that follow-up information on the status of implementation of those projects, including associated costs, be provided in the context of future reports of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, as well as programme budget proposals.**

16. The Advisory Committee takes note of the statement that the productivity gains made by the electronic flow of documents would shift the work of text processors from typing to the more complex tasks of proof-reading, formatting and desktop publishing (ibid., annex I, para. 8).

17. The Advisory Committee takes note of the plan for upstream planning and the establishment of a slotting system for the processing of reports (ibid., paras. 53-56). **The Committee points out that a systematic analysis of all the reasons behind the delays in the issuance of documents would need to be carried out in order to improve upstream planning and make it effective. Moreover, with regard to the proposed slotting system, the Committee stresses that it will be necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the measures taken and adjust them accordingly in the light of experience.**

18. The report describes the background relating to the chronically late issuance of summary records (ibid., paras. 58-62). The suggestion is made in paragraph 61 that summary records could be replaced with digital sound recordings to be made available in all six official languages on the United Nations web site or at listening booths at the main conference centres where bodies entitled to summary records meet. The Advisory Committee notes that the Committee on Conferences, in paragraph 80 of its report,[2] has requested the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly no later than at its fifty-eighth session on possible ways of addressing the issue.

19. A number of innovations to decrease the distribution and reproduction of hard copies of documents are described in the report (A/57/289, paras. 63-66). Among these are the introduction of printing on demand, whereby documents in addition to the number initially distributed to missions and Secretariat staff are printed upon request, the direct shipping of documents printed externally to users outside Headquarters and the elimination of pouch or courier shipments of documents to duty stations that have the capability of downloading and printing their own copies from the Official Document System (ODS) or other United Nations databases. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the Department did not intend to eliminate hard copies altogether. **In the view of the Committee, a survey of all missions should be conducted in order to ascertain their views on this matter, as well as to determine their capacity to receive and print electronic documents, after which a study should be undertaken to examine the cost-effectiveness of assisting missions lacking that capability to attain it. Clearly, before any measures are taken to reduce the number of documents to be distributed, all documents not distributed in hard copy must be available on demand on ODS, and the implementation of any new procedures should be carefully monitored, including their impact on the provision of services to Member States.**

20. The Advisory Committee takes note of the report of the Secretary-General on the status of recruitment for the Interpretation Section at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (A/56/901) and the note by the Secretary-General on the simultaneous availability of parliamentary documentation in the six official languages on the United Nations web site (A/C.5/56/37).

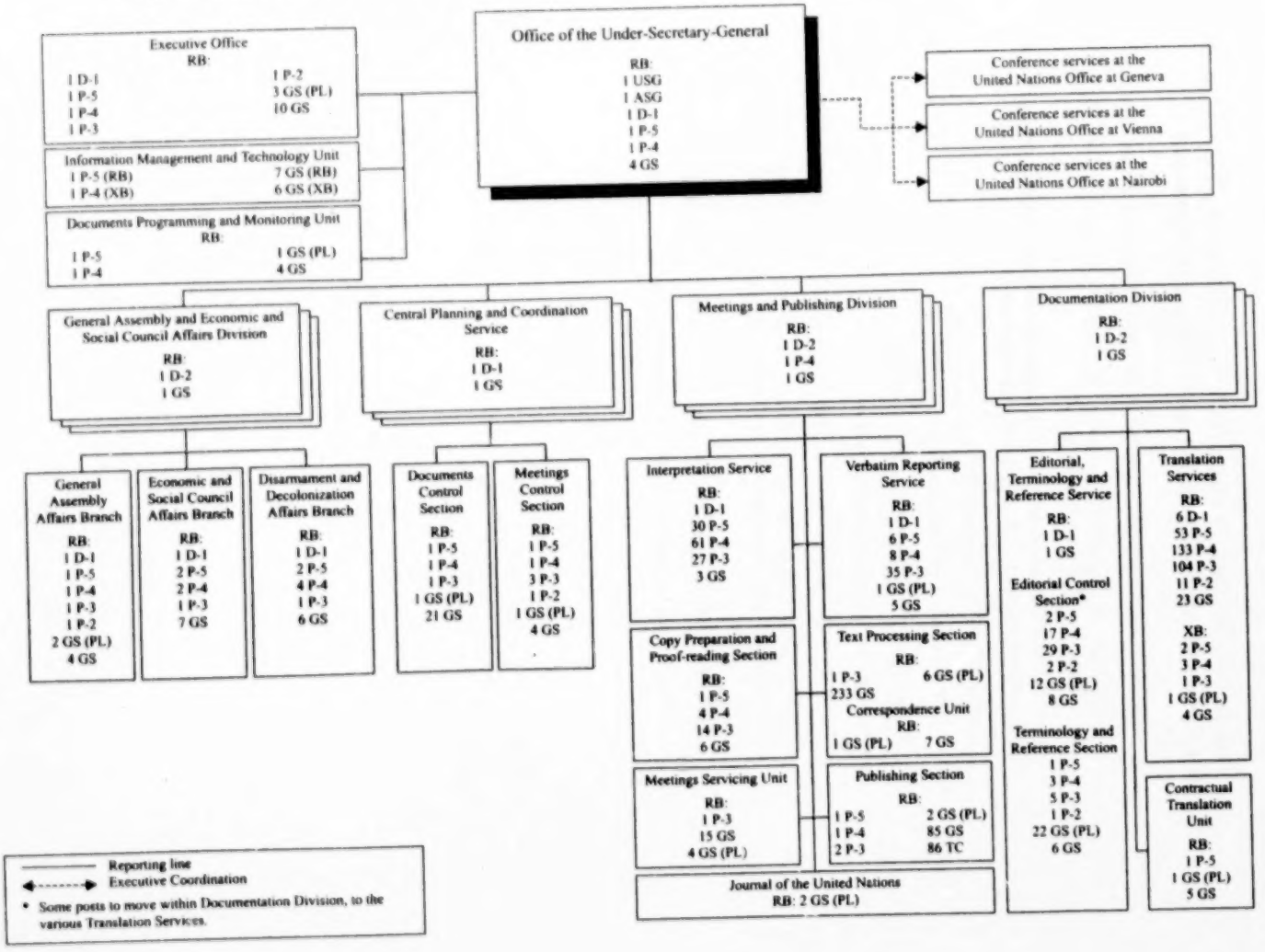
Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-sixth Session, Supplement No. 7* (A/56/7).

[2] Ibid., *Fifty-seventh Session, Supplement No. 32* (A/57/32).

Annex I

Department for General Assembly and Conference Management



Annex II

Problems affecting the quality of services in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

- "Crisis-mode" operation (i.e., last-minute additions to the work programme)
- Insufficient or inaccurate workload projections (especially with regard to overnight processing of documentation)
- Inaccurate information on expected length of meetings (especially with regard to meeting services — précis writing, interpretation)
- Late submission of manuscripts
- Submission of lengthy manuscripts
- Inadequate information technology support
- Poor quality of manuscripts submitted
- Difficulty in attracting, recruiting and retaining qualified language staff
- Demographics of language services (i.e., departures of experienced staff owing to retirement and consequential imbalance between experienced and junior staff)
- Difficulty in finding staff who possess the required language combinations
- Limited supply of qualified local interpreters/translators